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Nurturing New Careers: Preparing Future Librarians for Their Careers Through Pre-Professional Development Sessions at The University of Alabama Libraries

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Abstract

We describe a pre-professional development program for library school graduate assistants that helped participants learn career survival skills, gave them an overview of academic librarianship, and encouraged networking. Many intern or graduate assistant programs have focused on primary job training, but we know of few other assistantship programs featuring pre-professional development sessions on career survival skills like writing a CV or crafting a poster session. We discuss the structure, topics, and results of our program and provide suggestions for creating similar programs at other academic libraries.

Introduction

In many academic libraries, future librarians work as graduate assistants (GAs) answering reference questions, typing up catalog records, or processing book orders. Through these experiences, GAs gain real world know-how of their trade. However, in addition to mastering basic job skills, students undergo other aspects of professional maturation as they go about their daily tasks and brush shoulders with librarians. For example, the GAs learn about job hunting as they hear them share their “war stories” in the break room. Further, the GAs test drive career tracks and develop preferences while they work in various library departments. They also bond with other

GAs as well as librarians during their labors at the reference desk or cataloging department. In other words, the GAs go through a process of “pre-professional development”—learning about real world aspects of career survival, gaining their professional bearings, and networking with colleagues. In one assistantship program we sought to further enhance this invaluable learning process. In this article we describe our experiences coordinating a formal program of pre-professional development activities for GAs at The University of Alabama (UA) Libraries in 2003-2004.

Professional development encompasses anything that improves one’s ability to succeed in a field. It can take place through conference sessions, formal courses, webcasts, mentoring, or networking. The library profession as a whole places a premium on professional development for its members. Much of this emphasis on professional development springs from the old maxim that professional development is “an investment in the future.” If this saying holds true, it would seem that professional development for students on the verge of earning an MLIS—pre-professional development--would yield the most profits over the long run.

Of course, for LIS students, a great deal of pre-professional development already takes place through the library school curricula and ALA student group activities. Through courses, advising, and mentoring, library school faculty groom the next generation of librarians. In addition, many ALA Student Chapters offer programming and other activities that help acclimate their members to the profession. However, academic librarians have the potential to enrich the pre-professional development of LIS students in ways not possible through these traditional means alone.

MLIS Education and Academic Librarians

Associated with the broader focus on professional development, there is in fact a continuing need to improve MLIS programs in the library field. Indeed, we found that a number of articles highlight the need for improvements in LIS curriculum and specifically call upon academic librarians to help strengthen LIS education. Lillard and Wales (2003) encourage academic librarians to “make a commitment to ensuring the continued value of the professional degree” and help “prepare the information workers of tomorrow.”[\[1\]](#) In recognition of the growing concern over the quality of the LIS curriculum, Yontz (2003) also implores academic librarians to “help save library education.”[\[2\]](#) She points out that they can teach as adjuncts in LIS schools, offer to guest lecture, mentor students, and build rapport with LIS faculty. These initiatives will improve library education by making it more relevant to the needs of the field.[\[3\]](#) Moran (2001) challenges academic practitioners to partner with library school faculty in preparing students to meet the challenges of the coming century.[\[4\]](#) Lamoreux (2004) points out that many serial librarians will retire in the near future

and that librarians must help raise up a new generation of librarians through internships and other programs.[\[5\]](#) In recent years the American Library Association has even held a special conference, “Focus on Education for the First Professional Degree”, in an attempt to galvanize efforts to revitalize LIS programs.[\[6\]](#) With so many calls for help from the profession, academic librarians must think of creative ways to nourish LIS education.

Several articles point out that the internship offers an effective way for academic librarians to inculcate LIS students with the skills and values of their profession. The main purpose of an internship is to allow the participant to work in a library and garner practical experience as well as course credits. Bastian (2002) clearly shows that archival students and recent graduates view internships as a vital component in their success in the field. Those surveyed “considered the internship supervisor to be the factor having the most impact on the success of their internship.” Bastian also noted that “networking within the internship environment, receiving guidance and mentoring from their supervisors—all working archivists—and completing their internship projects” served to jumpstart their careers.[\[7\]](#)

In addition to archives, many academic libraries have successfully cooperated with library schools in their internship programs. Leonard and Pontau (1991) explain how academic librarians can collaborate with library schools through practicum courses. They report the results of a survey of San Jose State University’s library school alumni that showed that almost all of the graduates would recommend a practicum for current library school students.[\[8\]](#) In exploring the role of the academic librarian as a career mentor in addition to a skills trainer, the authors reveal that:

Practicing librarians also assist in professional value and identity development. The supervising librarian shares information about the profession in general, and also counsels and supports the library student. Interaction between librarian and student helps clarify and define the student’s professional values and ethics and may also help the student define career goals. SJSU graduates reported their own increased confidence after a successful practicum experience.[\[9\]](#)

In the same journal issue, Nahl, Coder, and Black (1991) offer a prototype for fieldwork experiences. Their program benefited the library but also helped the soon-to-be-librarians by giving them an opportunity for “experiential learning” in the words of one of the students.[\[10\]](#) Quarton (2002) outlines active learning techniques in her training and notes that her library’s internship program gave participants confidence about their reference skills.[\[11\]](#) Young (2001) highlights a successful internship program at Ohio State University Libraries that details the supervisors’ role of “launching librarians into an academic career.”[\[12\]](#)

Few practicing librarians would doubt the value of a pre-MLIS internship to a future library career. In this same vein, several articles suggest another way that academic librarians can give a boost to future colleagues: the graduate assistantship.

Traditionally, an assistantship differs from an internship. Instead of receiving course credits, a graduate assistant earns a stipend or other financial support for their education in exchange for working in a LIS department or an academic library.

Graduate assistants commonly work in academic libraries throughout the United States. For example, in one survey Womack and Rupp-Serrano (2000) revealed that graduate assistants worked in twenty-six out of thirty-six reference departments at universities with MLIS programs.[\[13\]](#) While a few may hail from departments like history or literature, most graduate assistants come from library schools who “lease out” GAs to libraries so that their students can reap practical pre-MLIS work experience through the structured assignments and training provided by campus libraries. Assistantship programs can give their participants the same benefits as an internship—if they take into account the career interests of the GAs.

The survey and several reports from the field reveal that many academic libraries already operate well-developed assistantship programs that prepare pre-professionals for their trade while also supplying much-needed staff support to libraries. Womack and Rupp-Serrano’s (2000) survey of academic libraries revealed that GAs perform a diversity of tasks that give them real world seasoning, and most librarians responding to the survey indicated that they provided ongoing training to their GAs.[\[14\]](#) Woodard and Van Der Laan (1987) outline their own intensive training program for GAs in reference services, accentuating the importance of initial tours, orientations, demonstrations, hands-on exercises, training videos, specific performance objectives, and collegiality.[\[15\]](#) Ohles (1988) composed an entire reference training manual for inclusion in the ERIC database. The manual offers worksheets, OCLC drills, library tour outlines, and index exercises.[\[16\]](#) Stephenson and St. Clair (1996) detail a pilot graduate assistantship program at the University of New Mexico, including the selection, training, and evaluation of the GAs.[\[17\]](#) Using sample training materials in figures, Spencer, Baker, et al (2005) suggest techniques for GAs such as flowcharts, memory aids, and the use of a journal.[\[18\]](#) Fors (2004) outlines a program for GAs at the University of Iowa Libraries that taught them bibliographic instruction skills.[\[19\]](#) In agreeing to supervise and train GAs in fine-tuned programs like these, academic librarians already provide a great deal of expertise in instructing future professionals. They create a “win-win” situation that boosts productivity in their libraries and educates GAs at the same time.[\[20\]](#)

While several articles highlight GA training programs that sharpen the routine work skills of pre-professionals, few authors outline an explicit professional development program that seeks to acclimate GAs to the profession, foster rapport among GAs and

librarians, teach GAs successful job hunting practices, or prepare GAs' for professional pursuits such as navigating conferences or composing poster sessions. Fors (2004) notes that her program includes weekly meetings between GAs and library school faculty members about library instruction issues. She briefly mentions that these meetings sometimes lead to broader discussions about career fields within the library profession.[\[21\]](#) Some of the other previous articles have noted that internships and assistantships propel professional acculturation by simply placing GAs alongside practitioners in everyday work routines. Through informal and conversational interaction with supervisors, GAs can anticipate many of the challenges that will face them as professionals. However, we would like to suggest a way that academic librarians can further facilitate the professional acculturation and networking processes. At the University of Alabama we experimented with a formalized pre-professional development program for graduate assistants that consisted of a year-long battery of activities covering a range of career-essential topics.

Background of Graduate Assistants in The University of Alabama Libraries

Each semester, ten graduate assistants from The University of Alabama's School of Library Information Studies work in various departments in the University Libraries, including archives, reference, cataloging, metadata, and specialized libraries. Like many other intern or GA programs, the University of Alabama Libraries offer job-related training to its GAs, but the librarians also added a pre-professional development program a few years ago. In 2001 Associate Dean Karen Croneis, in consultation with a task force, enhanced the program so that it also encompassed thematic career sessions as well as rapport-building among the GAs. Before the professional development program, the GAs had few chances to formally gather together and discuss their positions, experiences, and expectations.

In the new program one of the librarians who supervised GAs would serve as a professional development coordinator. The graduate assistants formed a committee-of-the-whole that elected their own coordinator to work with the librarian coordinator in creating programs. Designating a librarian coordinator and a GA coordinator ensured that the program would stay focused on the needs of the GAs while relying on the knowledge and experience of the librarians for guidance. The program allocated two hours per week to the GAs during the first two and half months of their assistantships to participate in professional development activities (this allocation was in addition to time scheduled for job training). Other librarians and GAs had experimented with professional development activities for a few years by the time we took the helm in 2003. We thus had some past experiences to guide us.

The GAs and supervisors met as a group at the beginning of the fall semester to start organizing activities for the year. They elected two GA co-coordinators, Allyson Ard and Patrick Sessions. Brett Spencer agreed to serve as the librarian coordinator. We, the three coordinators, met early in the fall semester to brainstorm programming ideas. We first conducted a brief survey of the GAs, revealing that most of the GAs had the strongest interest in job prep workshops on topics such as crafting a CV or résumé and succeeding in interviews. Other areas of interest included navigating professional conferences, planning instruction sessions, and tasting some of the varied subfields of the library profession.

We also made another decision early in the semester to encourage more attendance at the GA programs. In past years the professional development programs only encompassed GAs. We decided that this year we would invite all LIS students at UA to participate since the information would have value to any soon-to-be-librarian. We also decided to partner with the American Library Association Student Chapter and the library school's Student Advisory Committee in some of our programming efforts. The GA co-coordinators met with officers of the two student groups to plan joint programming for the spring semester.

Coordinating the Activities

Taking into account the interest surveys, we sponsored sessions on the following topics:

- **Job Hunting**—Several speakers presented a series of workshops on creating CVs or résumés and answering questions at interviews. Former Dean Charles Osburn, former Associate Dean Anne Edwards, and Personnel Officer Angela Wright provided top-notch advice on interviewing for academic library positions. Topics included the differences between CVs and resumes, appropriate dress for interviews, tips for interview presentations, and the importance of researching a potential employer. We also found an excellent list of library interview questions[\[22\]](#) and a career resource center for library science students on the Internet.[\[23\]](#) We distributed the links for these sites to workshop participants through the library school listserv.
- **Creating Poster Sessions**—We learned about the role of poster sessions in LIS scholarly communication, but we also heard practical tips such as how to pin up a poster without sticking a needle through your thumb! Real life posters helped to illustrate the fundamentals of poster design. Using step-by-step worksheets, participants brainstormed ideas for their own posters before the end of the workshop.
- **Navigating Professional Conferences**—Reference Librarian Barbara Dahlbach offered solutions to the difficulties associated with attending a vast conference

like ALA. She pointed out that choosing the sessions you would like to attend before you travel to the conference and noting their locations can save you lots of time (and make it easier on your feet by avoiding unnecessary wandering). She passed around examples of conference agendas and other materials. We talked about how to “crash” a committee meeting so that you can discover and later join the committees that stir your interest. We also learned about some cost-cutting tips such as sharing hotel costs with a roommate and dining for free at vendor luncheons.

- Alabama Virtual Library (AVL)—Dr. Sue Medina of the Alabama Virtual Library spoke on the life cycle and nature of a state-wide virtual library. She recounted the difficulties of lobbying for the funding and soliciting support from lawmakers. Knowledge of the foundation, structure, purpose and maintenance of a state-wide virtual library equipped the GAs with a useful knowledge base for establishing similar projects. Dr. Medina, as the director of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, also gave a clearer understanding of consortia and their purposes and challenges to the students.
- Planning an Instruction Session—Brett Spencer, Coordinator of Library Instruction for one of the campus libraries, delivered a workshop on how to plan for and present an instruction session for any audience. Participants listed some of the best and worst practices in their experiences as students in library instruction sessions on a marker board. The attendees then broke out into small groups to study some real world course syllabi and write up sample lesson plans for library instruction sessions for those courses. Drawing on this information, a few enterprising GAs later conducted instruction sessions on the Library Literature database and WorldCat for their fellow library school students.
- Field Trip—Along with the ALA Student Chapter, we cosponsored a field trip to special libraries in the state including the Maxwell Air Force Base Library and the State Archives in Montgomery, Alabama.
- SLIS Career Day--We also allocated time for the GAs to attend our library school’s career day. This event featured various LIS professors sharing their enthusiasm for their individual specializations.

>Some of us also applied a portion of our professional development time to other projects besides the sessions. For example, the graduate assistants in reference created a poster session, utilizing the information they gathered from the professional development session on this form of scholarly communication, for the Alabama Library Association conference. The poster presented the results of a study on LIS students’ career interests and motivations, and the authors later turned the poster session into an article. This project addressed two interests discovered in the initial survey: navigating conferences and publication. Other GAs used some professional

development time to participate in library-wide functions, including a collection development meeting.

Impact of the Program

The UA Libraries' pre-professional development program supplemented the GAs' LIS courses and the primary work performed in their assistantships. The graduate assistants gained practical advice about finding their first jobs as well as other career-boosting topics. In addition, the program set a precedent for allocating work time to professional activities early in the careers of the pre-professionals.

Aside from absorbing lots of practical information from the formal presentations each week, the group aspects of the program promoted a lasting rapport among many of us as current and future library professionals. While we no longer have the opportunity to gather together each week, we now have a network of colleagues in various positions across the United States that we can contact for help or advice.

Whatsmore, we learned informally from each other as we gathered together and chatted about our experiences working in the different departments in the Libraries. This intercommunication addressed another one of the interests noted in the initial survey: many GAs said that they had interest in several areas of librarianship and wanted to better understand the work that other GAs performed. Through our interactions, the group learned about the exciting range of work that goes in the library profession and recognized the common challenges that we all face. In reflecting upon the program a year later, one former GA commented that she missed the weekly meetings because they helped her see the "larger picture" in the library field.

Overall, we believe that the benefits justified the program, and we encourage other libraries to create professional development programming for their GAs. Librarians must, of course, leverage the staffing needs of their library with the benefits of professional development sessions. Yet, investing part of the GAs' time in pre-professional development activities will yield many rewards for the profession--and perhaps even for the specific library if the GAs later ascend to professional positions there. While we do not claim to offer a model program for GAs, we will share some tips in the next section that may help other librarians expand the scope of their assistantship programs to include more professional preparation. As they consider a pre-professional development program, libraries may wish to start off with a smaller pilot project of two or three activities a semester.

Guidelines for Creating a Pre-Professional Development Program

When implementing a program, librarians should keep the following tips in mind:

- **Set Goals for the Program**—Understanding the importance of the program and outlining basic goals for the students is key to its success. Basic goals may include: providing networking opportunities for GAs, broadening their understanding of different departments and functions within the library, equipping them for the job search, and introducing them to conferences and publication.
- **Involve the GAs in the Planning and Coordination**—GAs should participate in the planning meetings for the program. Managers should encourage GAs to suggest programming ideas throughout their assistantship to ensure that the experience accomplishes its goal of fostering professional growth. Otherwise, the program may lose its relevance for the GAs. Designating a GA as a coordinator who serves as a link between the librarians and the graduate assistants will help keep lines of communication open.
- **Give GAs the Time to Participate**—Supervisors should allocate a specific number of hours for GAs to participate in professional development. While most of a graduate assistant's time and efforts should be spent on their primary job, a portion of their time should also go towards professional development activities that go beyond their day-to-day experiences. Just as most academic librarians dedicate part of their time to professional development, graduate assistants should set aside some time to broaden their knowledge and bond with their peers.
- **Collaborate with Groups and Departments**—Consider partnering with ALA Student Chapters, student activity groups, campus career centers, and other groups. You would not want to duplicate or compete with the programs that these groups already offer. Instead, the professional development program should incorporate the programs offered by these other groups and coordinate new activities for better results.
- **Invite GAs to Library Workshops**—One easy way of folding professional development into the GA experience is by inviting GAs to collection development, planning, or other types of meetings and workshops that your library already offers. As future librarians, these activities will likely make up a regular part of their job. An early introduction to these meetings will help them foresee the duties of their upcoming positions.
- **Gather Feedback about the Program**—Survey the GAs and other attendees of the sessions to ensure that the program met their expectations and needs. You can use these results to inform future program planning and to establish the need and effectiveness of the program, if necessary.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the literature on GAs and interns by outlining a program of pre-professional development sessions as opposed to a job-specific training program or work regimen. The UA program already encompassed training before we started a pre-professional development program in 2001. Womack and Rupp-Serrano's (2000) survey showed that many other academic libraries already provide job training to their GAs, and several authors have described highly effective programs that train GAs in primary job skills like searching a database or cataloging a book. However, we know of few other assistantship programs featuring deliberate pre-professional development sessions on career survival skills like creating a poster session or writing a CV. Other authors have observed that this type of learning takes place in an informal way in most assistantships, but we would like to note that formal group workshops further strengthen the process of instilling GAs with a professional repertoire.

The pre-professional development workshops and other activities also made the UA program different from most previous internship and assistantship programs in another way. Most other articles, such as Bastian's article on archival interns in 2002, focus on internships or assistantships within a single specialty area. In contrast, the pre-professional development program brought together GAs working in diverse subfields-archives, reference, metadata, an education library-and helped them learn from each other on a weekly basis. This article thus expounds upon the work of previous authors by showing that library-wide group sessions can invigorate assistantships by allowing GAs to network with a greater variety of people than they would encounter in only one department.

In addition to rapport-building, this mixing helps GAs develop a greater awareness of various career tracks. Recruiting various librarians as speakers for the sessions and taking field trips at different libraries also widens the scope of the GAs. All this exposure enables GAs to better understand their own perspectives and preferred specializations as well as others, thus helping them to formulate their professional plans. As Leonard and Pontau (1991) noted, supervisor-student interaction can "help the student define career goals."[\[24\]](#) In concurring with that point, we further note that interaction between GAs in different departments (as well as field trips to other institutions or lectures from several different librarians) can facilitate this goal-setting. Once again, this process may already take place on a more limited, informal level for many GAs, but formal activities involving all GAs add greater impetus to this process.

One other aspect of the internship or assistantship that we explored in our efforts was the relationship between these programs and library school student groups. Moran (2001), Leonard and Pontau (1991), and others have rightly advocated the need for collaboration between librarians and library school faculty. Although cooperation

between faculty and librarians will remain the main form of collaboration between LIS schools and libraries, we would also like to emphasize the potential for direct collaboration between library school student groups and the librarians or GAs working in libraries. At UA the GAs formed a committee-of-the-whole whose student and librarian coordinators partnered with the ALA Student Chapter leadership. The ALA Student Chapter helped develop many of the ideas as well as advertise the joint programs and encourage attendance among the entire library school student body. On the other hand, as a team composed of GAs and a librarian working within the campus library, we had easy access to librarians who could share their experiences with up-and-coming colleagues. We also helped brainstorm ideas and increase the number of programs offered to the LIS student body. Both the ALA Student Chapter and graduate assistant committee benefited from the arrangement as we pooled our ideas and coordinated our programming. In short, the GA program provided a springboard for broader library-library school collaboration.

A host of previous authors have called upon academic librarians to take an active role in LIS education, and many of them emphasize internship or assistantship programs as one of the most effective ways of helping LIS students. Many academic library assistantship programs already provide excellent skills training and structured work experiences. Whatever the exact contours an assistantship program take, librarians who supervise GAs are wise to dedicate a great deal of time and thought towards the first library jobs of fledgling librarians. During their assistantships, GAs develop the beliefs, habits, and skills that they will carry into their professional lives. While library schools bear the primary responsibility for educating new librarians, academic librarians can contribute greatly to the future—and already do in many libraries--by creating experiences that smoothen the entry into the library field. Grafting formal pre-professional development sessions onto some of these already successful assistantship programs in American libraries can help librarians do even more to nurture the careers of new librarians.

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